

This was the final project for the Ethnomusicology 20C (Musical Cultures of the World: Asia) course, taught by Professor Katherine In-Young Lee in Fall 2021 at UCLA. Students worked in groups to research and conduct an oral history with one of seven Asian and Asian American musicians. Each of the narrators are highly esteemed musicians with long professional careers in music performance. They also serve as important liaisons between their home countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the United States.

Profile of So Ra Kim

Korean percussionist, performance artist, world musician, and producer KIM So Ra is celebrated for her uninhibited, boundary-crossing activities in the world music scene. After the release of her 1st album A Sign of Rain in 2018, she successfully debuted in Europe and North America as an official showcase artist at the world's biggest music exposition WOMEX 2018 and Mundial Montreal 2018. In 2019, her first album A Sign of Rain was nominated for Korean Music Awards Best Jazz & Crossover Album. During her solo world tour, Kim was invited to reputable venues and festivals in 24 cities across 7 different countries in Europe, North America and Oceania.

The complex and energetic performances of Kim So Ra's 2nd album Landscape (2021) are more expressive and less restrained. She aims to present the distinct rhythms and timbres of traditional percussion, changed yet unchanged, in a more modern and sophisticated format. Pungmul and Shamanic rhythms have been passed down for generations across Korea's eight provinces. Through contemporary reimaginations of those traditional patterns and the expression of joy and release in her music, Kim aims to create a sort of ritual in which we can all take part in and find comfort.

Oral History Interview Transcript – So Ra Kim

00:02: **Javon DeGodwin:** Okay! Good Afternoon and Good Evening. My name is Javon DeGodwin and I will introduce my colleagues.

00:15: Alexandra Schulz and Gavin Thompson. Today we are going to be interviewing Kim So Ra.

00:25: **So Ra Kim:** Hi!

00:35: **Gavin Thompson:** My first question would be, What influences or drives your creativity?

00:45: **So Ra Kim:** My daily life is a main source of influence. Especially, when I am talking to somebody, or when I am walking alone, or when I am exposed to other artists' great paintings and books, creative ideas randomly come to me. So, I believe creativity is never kept in a certain time or place. Also, it is a habitual routine for me to connect every bit of daily life with my musical pieces. Through this process, creative ideas are built up and eventually produced as my music works.

01:35: **Javon DeGodwin:** What new ideas or events have you seen yourself becoming a part of? Are you doing anything new than you would have before?

01:47: **So Ra Kim:** Recently, I collaborated with the live drawing artist Junggi Kim. In a way, the live drawing genre may seem like the farthest genre to be collaborated; however, in the end, I was very satisfied with it because Mr. Kim and I had the great synergy. I felt like painting is more intuitive in delivering the message compared to music and also it gives more imaginative room to express a countless number of subjects that could be drawn. If I have more opportunities, I would like to work with live drawing artists in the long term.

Just to briefly touch on what I am planning to do next year is to make concerto or chamber music centered on changgo. Although orchestras based on Western classical instruments are very common both globally and locally, percussion-based concertos are not very commonly played. So, I would like to make orchestra music for percussion and expand the scope of performances all over the world.

03:44: **Allie Schulz:** I've noticed in the online content of your performance that you are featured mostly as a solo performer. Was there a stage in your career or development as a changgo player in which you played in groups or ensembles?

04:33: **So Ra Kim:** Online-contents that you have found under my name are mostly related to soloist performances that are archived. Before then, I actively performed as a group under certain team names like DUO BUD and Nori kkot. Although I have been continuously working with these teams for a long time, those team projects are not very recognizable compared to my solo projects. Pungmul, samulnori ensemble, world music, and performing arts are the major performances that I have done before I dedicated myself as a soloist. Because I have done a lot of group performances, I would like to pursue solo performances for now.

05:30: **Gavin Thompson:** My second question would be... How and when did you become interested in music?

05:39: **So Ra Kim:** I started to be interested in changgo since 9 years old because I found out that my personality suits well with changgo's rhythmical energy. Especially, I tend to enjoy learning and playing challenging rhythms because in the end, it gives me the pleasure of accomplishment in mastering various rhythms. This cycle of training is always ongoing, and my definite goal of continuous learning and practicing motivates me to pursue my music career.

06:28: **Javon DeGodwin:** What was life like for a Korean percussionist during the height of Covid-19? Did you record more? Start teaching over zoom? Make new business decisions?

06:40: **So Ra Kim:** During Covid-19, there was not much of a difference in my life except travel restrictions which blocked world tour performances. I continued my practice as usual, and I was able to spend more time on creating quality visual content

in replacement of live performances with the audience. Also, I have released my album and performed on stages, so I did not feel any huge difference before and after Covid-19. Moreover, because I had more time I was able to flashback my music career and publish my book. Then, I focused more on my next steps to map out my future projects in detail.... But my environment is very different. The music is always the same.

08:20: **Allie Schulz:** Are there any iconic pop artists who have influenced your aesthetic decisions when it comes to costume, stage lighting, music videos? Are there any living musical and/or visual artists with who you would love to collaborate?

08:42: **So Ra Kim:** Actually, I really love classical musicians. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma and pianist Ryuichi Sakamoto are the living artists who influenced me in terms of musical senses and artistic values. Because they are already legendary musicians, I am fully satisfied just the fact that I can listen to their music; however, it would be such an honorable experience if I could collaborate with them. I tend to fall in love with music that is based on western classical music but also has an Asian taste with lyrical expressions. Miyeon and Park Je Chun are Korean musicians who also inspired me a lot. I have already collaborated with them many times, and they are the ones that I would like to follow. Other than the artists that I have mentioned, there are too many great artists which makes me hard to choose. I do not really put any limit when choosing genres, so as long as I am capable and available, I would love to do as many collaborations as I could. Moreover, if mainstream music like K-pop or pop artists want Korean rhythms in their music, it would be much more interesting opportunity for me; however, I would strongly hope such opportunity could expand deeper and wider instead of just a one-time incident.

10:45: **Gavin Thompson:** My next question would be, What is your view or experience with collaboration?

10:55: **So Ra Kim:** My definition of collaboration is communication. Understanding of the other artist's genre is the foremost step when creating something new through collaboration. I think the best of each artist's strength should be communicated well to create a better result. So, collaboration is not just about aligning two genres. It should be more about how each genre has been soaked to the music in harmony....Every life is a collaboration whether it is speaking or music

12:18: **Javon DeGodwin:** You mentioned that you like to incorporate rhythms from other genres to your music, have you used rhythms from all over the world? For example, Afro Cuban? Brazilian? Indian tabla rhythms?

12:34: **So Ra Kim:** I have always thought that Korean traditional rhythms are in complete perfection. Countless number of rhythms are already developed, and so, I always prefer to select the rhythm that can become the main within the music. When I use different country's musical rhythms like Afro or Indian, I purposely chose particular rhythm that could make Korean traditional rhythms stand out more. So, during my world tour or workshop, I looked for the ways to utilize Korean traditional

rhythms in other countries' music compositions. I am sure other globally known rhythms like Brazilian and Tabla began in the similar way.

13:30 Allie Schulz:

That's so interesting about choosing the rhythms that would complement the uniqueness of the Korean rhythms. I have a question for you about the gender dynamics in the Korean percussion scene at this time in Korea. Being a Korean percussionist in Korea, are you one of the few? And do you predict any changes to occur regarding the spaces women occupy in music in Korea?

14:35 So Ra Kim:

I think it is more suitable to ask whether percussion soloists are common or not. Like I said before, male musicians are dominant in Korean traditional percussion field, and percussionists in general are quite a lot. Within this field, there are some different professional sectors like SamulNori, pungmul nori, accompaniment with strings or woodwinds, master, and so on. If you ask if there are many soloists among those different sectors, it is difficult to say yes. I have never met other percussion soloist like myself until now, so I could say that my musical career as a female percussion soloist is very rare and unique. Also, I am sure that younger generations in this field are influenced by me in some extent. Going forward, I really hope that more talented artists who pursue skills and artistic values come out more in the future. I also try my best to be the greater artist as well. Regardless of gender, I would strongly hope that traditional percussionists expand their musical career wider.

So, uh, in Korean Percussion music everything style is like the group music ensemble. In Korea Until right now we don't change the music style, so I think most of the great soloists come up very quickly. So, it's very important and very neat. The soloist is very important in the music scene.

17:04 Gavin Thompson:

What is your view/experience with practicing vs performance?

17:18 So Ra Kim:

Ever since I was young and up until now, practice and performance are not very different. I practice as if I am on the stage for the actual performance because I know that practice makes perfect. When I practice, I always try to think of every possibility that could happened during the actual performance by imaging myself on the stage. I know my obsessive practice routine can make other artists tiring, but I am sure that my dedication to practice makes the proper performance.

I think I am not a sensitive person, but during the practice or during the performance I am really sensitive, so most of my musician friends are really tired when we were working together or performing on the stage. They say, "So Ra, how to make energy when you are performing for a long time?"

Next! (she laughs)

18:48 **Javon DeGodwin:** Oh, yea, sorry about that. OK so we are gonna go to my question next. So, you've practiced your studies with a master. Is this how you say her name correctly? Yu Ji Hwa? Tell me more of Master Yu Ji Hwa? A particular story that you will never forget with you and your master?

19:10 **So Ra Kim:**

Yea. Episodes with my master Yu Ji Hwa are too many to be told. I think we need a week or even more. She is my mentor in all areas, and I respect her the most as the female percussionist. In Korea, the number of female percussionists are very few and so it is even harder to find the talented professional female percussionist. I am very lucky to meet her in a very young age when I started music. Relationship with her is more than just master and student. We are more like mom and daughter relationship, so we have shared extended life experiences beyond music.

Right now I just think, when I am just, when I was 25 years old I married. You know, so we are, wedding day, Joyce, how can I say? (She speaks in Korean to her manager)

20:46 **Joyce Ha:**

On your wedding day. On my wedding, yea.

20:49 **So Ra Kim:**

On my wedding day, I think she really wants to, like a parent.... (Speaks in Korean)

21:06 **Joyce Ha:**

Oh, I think Master Yu Ji had wanted to sit um on the the seat where her parents had been sitting on. But then she wanted to be, she thought her like a daughter, like a daughter like student.

21:24 **So Ra Kim:**

But I didn't think. But when I finished the wedding, she's just gone. Because she goes to the house very quickly. But after that I went to her house, so I heard about the story. (Speaks in Korean)

21:52 **Joyce Ha:**

Oh, ok.

21:54 **So Ra Kim:**

Kind of jealous.

21:56 **Joyce Ha:**

Oh yea I guess she, Yu Ji, was a little bit disappointed because So Ra did not consider her that importantly I guess. Because Yu Ji wanted to be cared like a parent because this was so important to her, but to So Ra, she already had parents, so she didn't really think in that sense. So after all, like, I guess she was kind of disappointed and left early.

22:27 So Ra Kim:

So, Yu Ji Hwa, she is my teacher and mentor or mom, sometimes friend, sometimes just boyfriend kind of. Every, so she and I, just the relationship is really detailed. So I cannot (speaks in Korean to Joyce)

23:06 Joyce Ha:

I think for So Ra Yu Ji Hwa is the person who can become her parent but also at the same time, so it's like a family, and there's no boundary, within like, both a family member and also a master or teacher. So it's like, I guess all in one.

23:26 So Ra Kim:

So, it is really important thing. Because the Korean traditional music culture is very similar. Like every student and every teacher is like a kind of family. So, most of great Korean traditional musicians, they were very young age. Starting in the music. So the family thing is very. I think the Korean musical culture is like the family.

24:15 Joyce Ha:

It's not like you learn from here and there, it's more like you meet one teacher at a young age. And you become like a family for a long time and then your teacher passes down her techniques and her music, and even the thinking or values. Like artistic values are related because you are closely in contact with one teacher most of the time. It's very different from other music culture or learning about, like if you compare with Western music, it's very different.

24:58 So Ra Kim:

Interesting.

24:59 Javon DeGodwin: Amazing

25:03 Allie Schulz: I'll ask my next question because your answer to the previous question sheds some light on the culture of making a decision to be a musician. My question is: did you always know you wanted to be a musician as your career? Was there ever a moment where you considered another life path? But it sounds like you had someone with you so closely in that dynamic relationship, that that might have made leaving the path of a musician different.

25:41 So Ra Kim: I have never doubted about my career as a musician, so I would say I always wanted to be a musician. But I sometimes have more interests in different genres and different fields. I actually have a doctoral degree in Art Business, and I have various experiences other than the performer like the director of international arts exchange business, creative planning director, and producer. So my biggest concern these days is about how to bring all my past experiences together and build my career path on top of them.

26:32 So Ra Kim: So recently, I've always been thinking about that question. So it's a really great question for me.

26:48 Allie Schulz: Thank you. That's such an interesting answer and inspiring to think about all of your pursuits and talents coming together.

26:56 **So Ra Kim:** So I think everything is connecting. When I think, I am just a musician. Sometimes I work as a direction, producer- for a performance. How to put it in the center, all together. I think it's very very cool.

27:43 **Joyce Ha:** Because she has a lot of different experiences, not just as a performer, but as she said, a director, producer, and performer. Her biggest concern is how to mix all those experiences together at one place going forward for her music career. She is more focused on what she can do with her past experiences.

28:14 **So Ra Kim:** I have so many experiences. In my work career I really want to help younger musicians.

28:43 **Joyce Ha:** I guess that's her next task for her music career. To be developed more.

28:53 **Javon DeGodwin:** As you've seen yourself grow as a musician through the years, have you noticed an increase of changgo players in other countries? Has this instrument become more popular outside of Korea and in Korea?

29:33 **So Ra Kim:** Thank you for your question. In 2012 when I started to shape my music career as a soloist, the number of percussionists in general were many, but not many of them played as a soloist or actively created his or her own colored music. Most of the Korean traditional music has been passed down from the few masters, and because percussion music is a group-based music, becoming a soloist in this field was very rare. Also, traditionally, male percussionists are dominant in this field, so female percussionists used to have less opportunities. I wanted to pioneer this field to provide more opportunities to female percussionists by transforming the current performing arts environment. As time goes by, I was able to meet more young percussionists compared to the past. Also, sometimes I am proud of myself when I meet percussionists whom would like to walk the path that I have come along. As of now changgo is still an unfamiliar instrument to people overseas. Although changgo is familiar within Korea, it has not been deeply settled in terms of instrumental music like Indian tabla or African djembe. I know it is a challenging task, but when worldly recognized changgo players appear and when Korean traditional rhythms become more familiar to many educational institutions, I believe changgo can be more popular than now in the future.

32:26 **Allie Schulz:** Okay, I have one last question. Who did your lighting design for the video titled: Landscape? And do you collaborate with this person a lot? Do the visuals come to you as part of the music or after the music or do you see visuals and hear the sounds making one creative piece together?

33:06 **So Ra Kim:** Director Li Seok is already popular in Korea as a media artist. He has collaborated a lot with popular rappers and K-pop artists, but he told me that it was his first collaboration with Korean traditional percussion music. Even before collaboration, I already knew about his works through music videos and I was thinking that his work of art could really go along well with my music. My fellow artists also felt the same, so I reached out to him first. During the meetings, I let Li Seok to listen to my music hoping that Li Seok could read my music to bring up his own style, which is modern and trendy. I was glad that his modern and trendy style was well

portrayed through our collaboration. To give you more details, my music was already made by myself, and then Li Seok's visual ideas were added upon. Especially, Li Seok's new perspective on traditional changgo playing notes was very interesting to me, and I really loved that his media arts was not just background. His media arts was more of balance and harmony that encompass changgo, rhythms, music, visual and lighting effects all together which align with my pursuit. So sometimes, Korean traditional musicians try to collaborate with other musicians or other artists. Recently, in Korea, media artists are really popular in Korean traditional music. So some younger artists play their music using the background media art. Sometimes I try to do the same thing, but I really wanna do media art and changgo mixed. Li Seok really understands me so we try to make some great work. When you watch the landscape music video we made it.

35:58 **Allie Schulz:** I love the video. It's very cool!

36:00 **Javon DeGodwin:** Yeah I've seen it too. It was amazing.

36:08 **So Ra Kim:** This is a really modern style.

36:27 **Joyce Ha:** I think the music video she's talking about she thinks is a very good mix of contemporary and original mixed together in one project so she's very satisfied with that.

36: 45 **Gavin Thompson:** Our last question is: Is there anything we have not asked you, that you would like to talk about?

37:00 **So Ra Kim:** No, I think you have asked everything I'd like to talk about.

37:13 **Joyce Ha:** The questions were enough and were quality questions

37:24 **So Ra Kim:** Thinking about the answer for the question. I was thinking about my background so it's a really great project.

38:00 **Joyce Ha:** I think she enjoyed the whole interview process because it was a very meaningful time for her to flashback her younger age until now. We live in a very fast world. You tend to go straight. It was a great time for her to go back to her early age to think about her music career. She really hopes this kind of project will continue for other artists too.

38:50 **So Ra Kim:** My friend is my artist director and she told me it was a really important interview and to take a video.